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ABSTRACT

For students who live and study at a branch campus of a mid-sized state university in southwest Pennsylvania, the 30 miles between them and their parent university represents a geographic gulf. No courier carries mail or deliveries between the main campus and the branches, and as a result, students at the branches have no access to the campus newspaper. Students are easily forgotten by departments. The branch campus population of about 200 is composed primarily of students designated as underprepared and at-risk. The landscape in the field of composition, however, is currently burgeoning with practices which urge student writers out into communities beyond their classrooms. Instructors have turned to publishing and field work as successful pedagogy for positioning their students as capable scholars. "Images," the branch campus literary magazine, has published student writing for years, and students are also encouraged to present papers at the English department's annual undergraduate Emerging Scholars conference. In addition, students are encouraged to submit their writing to a Web-published collection of model essays from heavily-enrolled courses such as basic writing and college writing. Two vignettes illustrate some results of students taking their work public. Field work using ethnographic methods has proven to be another vehicle through which underprepared branch campus students can position themselves as scholars. Ethnography creates a situation where "students are knowledge makers." To the student, to the parent campus, and to the community, this pedagogy creates visible benchmarks of attainment. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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by Helen Collins Sitler

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Risking Exposure: Branch Campus Writers Go Public

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Armstrong County Campus

Presentation at CCCC in Minneapolis, April 13, 2000

The students I speak with you about today work on the fringes--of the community in which they are housed, of their parent university, and of academe in general. To open I offer you a glimpse of the context which I believe constrains our students and then turn to the pedagogy which has begun to give our students a voice and move them away from the fringes.

I teach at a branch campus of a mid-sized state university in Southwest Pennsylvania. One of two branches operated by my university, my campus lies 30 miles west of main campus. We are situated within a residential neighborhood in the county seat of rural Armstrong County. With residence halls literally beside homes, some complaints from neighbors about noisy students, underage drinking, and last fall's rather spectacular experiment to discover whether plastic bread trays burn (They do.) are inevitable. In spite of such occasions, when two students in my Fall '99 College Writing class surveyed customers at a grocery store 4 blocks from our campus, townspeople reported favorable impressions of our student population. Still students report that they do not feel particularly welcomed by this town. They are strangers temporarily housed within the community for a year before they transfer to main campus.

The 30 miles between us and our parent university represents a geographic gulf. Our branch and consequently our students drift out of our university's consciousness. Seemingly small irritants gradually add up. No courier carries mail or deliveries between main campus and the branches. As a result, our students have no access to the campus newspaper unless someone from

our area picks it up at main and delivers it to us. Our students are easily forgotten by departments. One student writer, the winner of a model essay contest for Basic Writing, was nearly excluded from the contest when the contest director could not find his name on fall semester class lists. She hadn't checked the branch enrollments. Recently one department handed our freshmen information about scholarships after all the application deadlines had passed. Her comment was, "It's too late for this year, but next year you can apply." As is obvious, our students get not-so-subtle messages about their importance in the larger context of the university.

Expectations create an even larger gulf than the problems of geography. While our commuters have chosen to begin college on our campus, most of our students have not arrived by choice. Our population of approximately 200 is comprised primarily of students designated as underprepared and at-risk. They may transfer to main campus as sophomores if they earn a 2.0 QPA. Some of our developmental students will earn the 2.0 QPA. The majority, however, are expected to drop out, transfer elsewhere, be dismissed for unacceptable academic performance, or spend additional semesters at the branch. The stigma of underpreparedness attaches itself to our commuters also. They admit that when they tell friends which university they attend, they announce their enrollment at our branch only if it cannot be avoided.

I repeat these realities about the milieu in which we work not to cast a shadow of disaster, but rather to bring attention to the many ways in which our students are marginalized from the moment they begin their college careers. Situating our students on the fringes of the communities in which they participate has negative effects on their perceptions of themselves and, therefore, on their academic performance.

"What people do is often better predicted by their beliefs about their capabilities than by

measures of what they are actually capable of" (Pajares & Johnson 313). McLeod's review of literature clarifies that the dangers of negative expectancies of students have more far-reaching and long-lasting effects than positive expectancies (109). Dyson, although writing about children and literacy, informs us about the way a person of any age brings out-of-school knowledge to bear in school. She writes that children (or, for our purposes, learners) "reframe aspects of new practices ... within old familiar ones" (353). They develop "new reflective angles on old experiences" (353). To our underprepared students the new practices are those of the academy, but too many of the reflective angles remain as they have been in our students' pasts. Even in this new university setting, they continue to receive myriad institutional and community signals which reinforce what they already believe about themselves--that they are insignificant in the larger scheme of the university and that they are expected to make no real impact there or at our branch.

Teaching English

When I arrived at the branch two years ago and announced to an English Department colleague that I wanted to send my College Writers out to conduct field work and possibly to participate in service learning, he shuddered visibly. "I'd never do that," he said. "I'm too afraid of what they'll do." While this landscape of anticipated failure and/or lack of trust maintains itself to some degree even on my campus, the landscape in the field of composition is currently burgeoning with practices which urge student writers out into communities beyond their classrooms.

Over the past two years my colleagues have supported and joined my efforts to focus our students outward. We have turned to publishing and to field work as successful pedagogy for positioning our students, to themselves and to others, as capable scholars. In this way our activity

contrasts with institutional messages of low expectations and provides ways for our students to develop new reflective angles.

Publishing

Publishing, brought to the fore through the work of Atwell, has emerged as a primary vehicle for helping our students represent themselves as scholars. Britton et al. (1975) argued the detrimental effects on writing and learning when audience is limited to "teacher as examiner" (122-128). More recently Kuriloff has argued that peers and readers familiar to student writers serve better as audiences than their teachers. Not only do these other audiences offer distance between the writing and a grade, they force stronger work. Real readers set aside writing that fails to meet their expectations. Who but a teacher reads poor work all the way through (496-500)?

Avenues for publishing on our campus have taken numerous forms. *Images*, our branch campus literary magazine, has published student writing for years. In addition, over the past two years we have encouraged our students to present papers at the English Department's annual undergraduate Emerging Scholars conference. Each semester I publish selected students' work as models for the next semester's students. This year we have begun contributing a weekly column, the *Armstrong Angle*, to the university's newspaper *The Penn*. We have also encouraged students to submit papers to a new contest sponsored by the English Department, a web-published collection of model essays from heavily-enrolled courses such as Basic Writing and College Writing. In every one of these venues our students, the ones who caused visible shudders when I suggested making them or their work public, have achieved notable success. I offer two vignettes here as a means of looking at some results of our students taking their work public.

Dave, Lizzy, and Ray

Dave and Ray began at our campus in Basic Writing. Lizzy, in her early twenties, entered school in January. Neither a basic writer nor a student whose record would have automatically placed her at our branch, she chose the branch for the convenient commute from her home. After a heated class debate one day over what a poor reader I, or any teacher would be, for one of Dave's papers, I suggested the class follow up on their questions about teacher as audience by preparing a paper for the upcoming English Undergraduate Conference. Dave, Lizzy, and Ray formed a team. These three freshmen read Vygotsky; Elbow; Kutz, Groden & Zamel; Belanoff; and Britton. Their resulting collaborative essay negotiated questions related to the teacher's role in the composition classroom. After their presentation--the first ever at this conference by any branch campus students--one faculty member remarked, "They knocked our socks off." Indeed, their presentation was more substantial than that of the senior Technical Writing students who presented in the same session with them. Ray and Dave were among our most at-risk students. According to all predictors, both should have flunked out. Dave finished the year in good academic standing. Ray finished on the Dean's List, having earned a 4.0 his first semester.

None of these three students remained enrolled at my university. Ray transferred to a university back home in Philadelphia. Lizzy moved out of state and now attends another state university. Dave has not stayed in touch. While I regret that none are still enrolled at my university, I know they have discovered their own power as scholars. On the anonymous student evaluations completed at the end of College Writing, someone had written, "I thank her [the instructor] for pushing me to present an argument at main campus." The line had to have come from one of these three students.

Matthew

Matthew says, "I didn't apply myself in high school." He says he has always written, in a journal when he was upset or needed to get something down, but in high school his writing was never singled out. I met Matthew when his Basic Writing teacher sent him to me with an essay to consider for the *Armstrong Angle*. The essay, about the accidental drowning of the step-father Matthew had grown to love and respect, was a plea for readers to acknowledge the loved ones around them. *The Penn* ran the column just before Christmas.

Matthew's eloquence touched a nerve. Another student asked to post the essay on her web page. A stranger who works in an office somewhere on main campus tracked down his number and phoned Matthew at home. "I live in Griffendale [the scene of the drowning] and saw your essay in the paper. My family liked it." This man had not only read the column, but had taken it home for his whole family. A high school journalism teacher from Matthew's own high school (but a teacher who did not know him) called asking permission to reprint the essay in the school paper. One of her students had showed it to her. The lifeguards at the pool read it. Of course, Matthew's mother read it. Our campus literary magazine published it. Someone encouraged Matthew to submit it to the Chicken Soup series. A contract from the publisher is pending. His essay certainly isn't high brow literature, but how many Basic Writers can say their work has been accepted by a publisher?

When I asked him how he felt about all this as a writer, he said, "I get more respect from people around here now" and used my own class as an example. When I saw his name on my College Writing class list for this spring, I told him I was glad to see it there. He said, "No teacher ever said anything like that to me." His work has been recognized recently in another way; he was

hired as a peer tutor in the Writing Center. Encouraged by his instructor, he made public just one essay and set off this amazing string of events.

Field Work

Field work using ethnographic methods has proved to be another vehicle through which our underprepared students can position themselves as scholars. Given this year's 4Cs program it appears that ethnography has "arrived" in the composition classroom. Recognizing its newcomer status, however, especially in the undergraduate writing course, Chiseri-Stater & Sunstein in their 1997 text FieldWorking, encourage hesitant professors to "depart from what you already know and try out new approaches and new ideas" (vii). My students and I would agree.

Field work, both small scale projects and semester-long ethnographic studies, have been successful with our underprepared branch campus students. In part I believe this has occurred because any field work project links mental work with physical involvement. Boiarsky, citing Gardner's work, writes "Our perceptions about the intelligence of [some] students is caused by a limited definition of 'intelligence'" (11). Many intelligent students "have found school meaningless and learning difficult because their learning styles differ from the predominant teaching style" (13). While the trademarks of higher ed are linguistic and mathematical intelligences, many students require modes of learning which occur through direct experience and through interaction and collaboration (13).

In written reflections on their field work, students often report their satisfaction with their projects in terms of knowledge gained through human connection. Diane, who produced a history of the now-defunct, local elementary school she herself attended wrote, "I enjoyed the assignment because I found out information that I didn't even know before.... I think talking to friends and

people of my neighborhood helped me out a lot." Jeremy, in interviewing his grandfather about being a bombardier during World War II, reflected, "I liked doing the community investigation paper because it preserved some of my grandfather's history so that everyone in my family can read it or even listen to the interview on cassette." Further, at the end of his paper, Jeremy came to an interesting realization about how individuals construct their life stories. He wrote, "My grandfather describes [his war experiences] with positive significance.... By flying above the chaos during World War II my grandfather didn't get a chance to see or feel the trauma of war below him. If he could have seen the pain he caused by the bombs he dropped he might have told these stories in a different manner..."

Like connection with other humans, other connections brought about by field work also become beneficial. Too often our students' work in school stands discrete from their lives outside the classroom. Recent literature describes today's students as far more pragmatic than our own generation was; thus curriculum divorced from what students discern to be practical to their lives risks alienating them altogether. Development of a critical social consciousness, a goal of college teaching, need not occur in opposition to our students' more pragmatic approach to college as preparation for a working future (Durst 170-180). Field work can take the form of service learning, as I will later describe in this paper. It can also expose students to ethical and moral issues which link them to the larger world in ways which give them both agency and responsibility.

This semester Mary, a future dietician, chose to do case studies of three practicing vegetarians she knows. In conducting her work, she has found that her study participants' eating habits are dangerously non-nutritious. Mary has decided she must, through her paper, explain to

her participants why and in what ways their eating habits need to change. Amanda's completed study of customer service at the large grocery store where she works will position her to upset the usual balance of power. She will provide recommendations to her manager. Alexandra, who hopes one day to apply to the State Police Academy, is completing her ethnography of a local State Police barracks. Through her participants, she has become aware of the many gray areas of judgment involved in a typical working day. As she struggles to represent these conflicts in her paper, she is immersing herself in developing her own philosophy of moral conduct.

Students often choose field work topics for pragmatic reasons: personal interest and easy access. In the process of their studies, however, they invariably discover the ambiguities inherent in human behavior. They are then faced with making decisions about ethical representation and about disclosure of information. Their decisions have social and moral implications. Real audiences want copies of these papers; thus solid research, good writing, and the responsibility of proposing recommendations which bear some weight all fall on the shoulders of these student researcher/writers.

Field work offers yet one further compelling advantage, particularly important for students who perceive of themselves as empty vessels. Ethnography creates a situation where "students are knowledge makers" (Zebroski 32). Catherine, having conducted her ethnography at a restaurant near our campus, wrote this reflection about her study. "My findings may not seem earth-shattering, but I liked coming across them on my own. I didn't just have to go to the library to research something hundreds of other researchers have already discovered." Perhaps for the first time in her school career, Catherine became aware that she had constructed her own knowledge. How often do our students experience that?

I close my discussion of field work with a vignette from our sister branch campus, an environment similar to my branch with a population of underprepared students and lack of connection to main campus. My counterpart's Research Writing students recently concluded a community service oral history project. With the assistance of the local Historical Society, the students interviewed elderly residents of a dying town near their campus. They have now preserved the vibrance of this once-thriving town using their interviews, archival research, and investigation into connected issues to produce a written record. The student researchers reported feeling appreciated by the townspeople for creating something of lasting value. They had learned how to conduct and participate in interviews, but more importantly how to trust themselves to get an important job done. This service to their community, as well as the scholarship which led to it, has raised their expectations for themselves and has pointed out to their community their true capabilities.

Conclusion

Those of us who teach at branch campuses or who teach developmental students make a dangerous misstep if we presume that unsuccessful students are incapable. Sternglass's longitudinal study of developmental students taking composition and then writing in other courses demonstrates quite the opposite. "The most significant central finding of this study is that students with poor academic preparation have the potential to develop the critical reasoning processes that they must bring to bear in academic writing if they are given the time" (296). Given adequate support, underprepared students, can succeed (298). Experience on our campus is congruent with Sternglass's findings--time-more than 1 semester, support, and challenge have proved to be significant factors in our students' successes. Our experience is also congruent with Palmer's

belief that when we give our students something of significance to do, they can achieve remarkable results (46-47).

Does every student on our campus develop new reflective angles for themselves through publishing and field work? The answer, of course, is no. I regret that more students have not participated to date in the opportunities we have begun to offer. The nonparticipants cause me to raise still further questions. How can we reach those students who have not as yet found that our campus offers them something of significance to do? Our faculty is discussing the idea of conducting our own campus-wide ethnography. Whether we do this or not, we do need to further assess the roles of environment, pedagogy, and outside factors on the performance and self-efficacy of our students. For the present, however, the pedagogy I have described here creates visible benchmarks of attainment. To the students, to our community, and to our parent campus, the visible markers become ways of saying, "Notice us. We're here and we're capable."

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